

MACLEAN'S
EBOOK EDITION

THE SHAFIA HONOUR KILLING TRIAL

BY MICHAEL FRISCOLANTI

The full story of a crime that shocked the nation
PLUS: *Evidence photos, interrogation videos and more*

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'A SICK NOTION OF HONOUR'

It was a case that shocked the nation—four family members dead, three guilty of murder. Michael Friscolanti tells the whole story of what happened.



CHAPTER 1

AN UNTHINKABLE
CRIME

THE POLICE DIVER who swam to the bottom of the canal found Zainab Shafia in the front passenger seat, her face slumped forward, her fingernails painted a light shade of blue. She was 19 years old and had 10 cents in her pocket. Her black cardigan, drenched after hours underwater, was on backwards.

Sahar, her younger sister, was in the rear of the sunken Nissan Sentra, dressed in a pair of tight jeans and a sleeveless top. Her belly button was pierced (a stud with twin stones) and her nails were polished two different colours: purple on the fingers, black on the toes. As always, the stylish 17-year-old was within reach of her cellphone—about to become a crucial clue for investigators above.

Geeti's lifeless body was floating over the driver's seat, one arm wrapped around the headrest, the window beside her wide open. Like Sahar—the big sister she idolized—Geeti had a navel ring underneath her brown shirt. Detectives would later find a note she had scribbled to Sahar, full of hearts and red ink: “i WiSH 2 GOD DAT TiLL iM ALIVE I’LL NEVER SEE U SAD!” She was 13.

Rona Amir Mohammad was slouched in the middle back seat, her soaked black hair rubbing against Sahar's. At 52, she was the eldest of the dead: the girls' supposed “auntie,” but in fact their dad's first wife in a secretly polygamous Afghan clan. The day she drowned, Rona put on a blue shirt, three pairs of earrings, and six gold

Not at peace: (Previous page) The graves of the three murdered Shafia daughters, in Laval, Que.

bangles. She was not wearing a seatbelt. None of them were.

It was June 30, 2009, the morning before Canada Day. Det.-Const. Geoff Dempster was supposed to work the afternoon shift, two 'til midnight, but his cellphone rang a few hours early. A colleague in the major crimes unit briefed him about the car full of corpses at the Kingston Mills locks, and asked him to come in as soon as possible. A few minutes after he arrived at police headquarters, three people showed up at the front counter to file a missing persons report: Mohammad Shafia, the girls' father, Tooba Mohammad Yahya, their mother, and Hamed Shafia, their 18-year-old brother.

Dempster, a veteran cop with short blond hair and a rookie's face, spent most of that Tuesday shift interviewing mom, dad and son, assuming, at first, that they were grieving relatives devastated to learn that their loved ones were gone. Their initial stories, videotaped for accuracy, were essentially the same. Wealthy Muslim family. Recent immigrants to Canada. Road trip to Niagara Falls, the 10 vacationers split between the Sentra and a silver Lexus SUV. Shafia, Tooba and Hamed all told the detective that they had stopped at a Kingston, Ont., motel on the way home to Montreal, and that Zainab grabbed the car keys to retrieve some clothes. The next morning, the Nissan—and nearly half the family—were gone. “That's it,” Shafia said. “I don't know anything else.”

But that was hardly it, as the detective soon realized. The more questions Dempster asked, the stranger their story sounded. Why would these women, after a six-hour road trip from Niagara Falls, pile into the Nissan for a middle-of-the-night joyride? Why did an eyewitness tell on-scene investigators that he saw two cars at the water's edge that night? And why did the



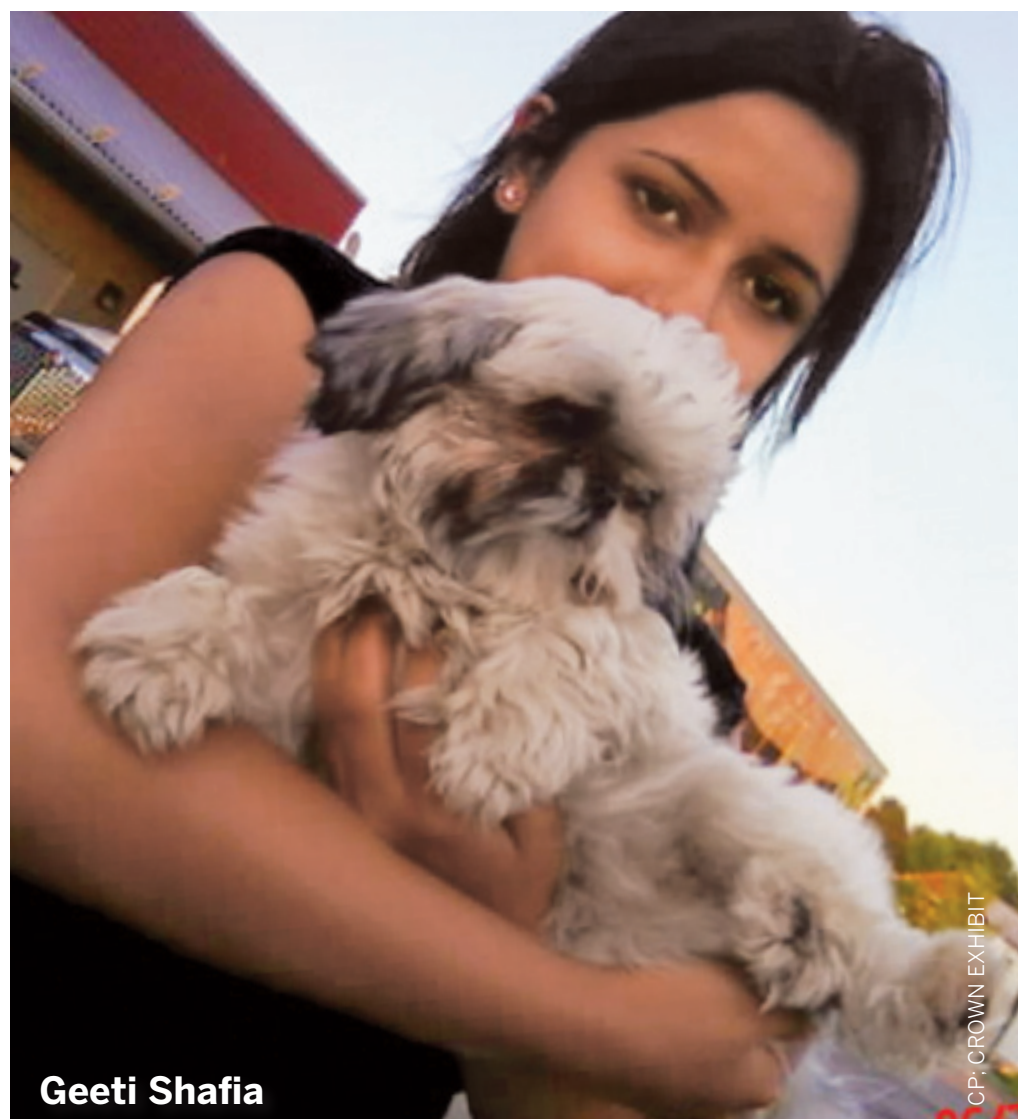
Rona Amir Mohammad



Zainab Shafia



Sahar Shafia



Geeti Shafia

Shafias show up at the station in a green minivan—not the silver Lexus they were driving during the vacation?

Hamed, not a tear in sight, told the detective that he didn't actually sleep at the motel with the rest of his family. Instead, he climbed back behind the wheel of the Lexus at two o'clock in the morning and continued toward Montreal, more than 300 km away. "I forgot my laptop," he explained. He was home for only a few minutes, he said, when his dad phoned to tell him the girls were missing.

"How come you came back in the Pontiac?" Dempster asked, referring to the minivan.

"No special reason," Hamed answered, mumbling about how the Lexus "takes more gas and fuel and stuff like that."

"The reason for coming back in the Pontiac and not the Lexus was because it's better on gas?" Dempster pressed.

"Well, that's one of the reasons."

"What would be another reason?"

"Nothing, uh, big," Hamed replied. "Nothing, ya know, that's worth telling."

What police discovered over the next three weeks would tell a story so chilling, so unthinkable to most Canadians, that the resulting trial captivated the country like few crimes ever have. Mother, father, and eldest son—motivated by an ancient, barbaric "honour" code—used their Lexus to smash that Nissan over the lip of the Rideau Canal, watching with perverted satisfaction as all four females vanished into the water. "I am happy and my conscience is clear," Shafia proclaimed the night before his arrest, unaware that a police wiretap was recording his every word. "They haven't done good and God punished them."

Today, a different punishment looms: life behind bars. After four months, 58 witnesses, and too

many lies to count, a jury found Shafia, Tooba and their beloved Hamed guilty of quadruple murder in the first degree. It took just 15 hours of deliberation for the jurors to reach their verdict.

The evidence, utterly heartbreaking, left no real doubt about the truth. Before they died, the Shafia sisters were caught in the ultimate culture clash, living in Canada but not allowed to be Canadian. They were expected to behave like good Muslim daughters, to wear the hijab and marry a fellow Afghan. And when they rebelled against their father's "traditions" and "customs"—covertly at first, then for all the community to see—the shame became too much to bear. Only a mass execution (staged to look like a foolish wrong turn) could wash away the stain of their secret boyfriends and revealing clothes.

Rona, it turns out, was simply a convenient throw-in, the infertile first wife who died as she lived. An afterthought.

"They committed treason from beginning to end," Shafia declared, during another one of his intercepted rants. "They betrayed kindness, they betrayed Islam, they betrayed our religion and creed, they betrayed our tradition, they betrayed everything."

His daughters died because they were defiant and beautiful and had dreams of their own. Because they were considered property, not people. But the two words at the heart of this sensational case—"honour killing"—do not tell the whole twisted tale. What happened on that pitch-black night is also a story about cries for help that were missed or ignored. About sibling rivalry and family snitches. About young love and old-fashioned police work.

And it's a story about a custom-built courtroom, where father, mother—but not son—took the stand to proclaim their innocence.